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ABSTRACT

This paper traces some of the major theories and research findings concerning the development of self-identity during the first two years of life. The discussion begins with some basic assumptions of identity formation, offers an historical perspective with discussion of William James' major aspects of self, and concludes with observations on the importance of the mother/infant attachment and on Erik Erikson's emphasis on the importance of the development of trust during infancy. (RH)

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An Overview of Concepts Concerning the
Development of Self-Identity During
the First Two Years of Life

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Abstact

The sense of self is at the core of our personal identity and is central to the process of human development. It is a life long process and one that develops gradually from the day that we are born and continues until the day that we die. This paper will trace some of the major theories and research relating to the development of self-identity during the first two years of life. It will begin with some basic assumptions of identity formation, offer an historical perspective with discussion of William Jame's major aspects of self, and end with the importance of the mother/infant attachment and Erikson's emphasis on the importance of the development of trust during infancy.

An Overview of Concepts Concerning the
Development of Self-Identity During
the First Two Years of Life

The sense of self is at the core of our personal identity and is central to the process of human development. It is a life long process and one that develops gradually from the day that we are born and continues until the day that we die. It has always been of great interest to child development researchers concerning the development of this sense of self in the infant. It is believed that some concept of self is necessary in order to be able to explain human behavior and that preliminary information about self is available to the infant at birth.

The infant is born with many adaptational demands. To meet these demands, the infant has the ability to adjust to the environment, to discriminate among different stimuli (sounds, voices, things to look at and touch), to be aware of movement, and to mature. These early abilities form the foundation upon which the ego or sense of self is built; they powerfully influence the way in which children experience themselves and the world. (Musick & Householder, 1986; p. 316).

As early as the first day of life, the process of identity formation has begun.

This paper will trace some of the major theories and research relating to the development of self-identity during the first two years of life. It will begin with some basic assumptions of identity

formation, offer an historical perspective with discussion of William Jame's major aspects of self, and end with the importance of the mother/infant attachment of trust during infancy.

The following are some basic assumptions related to the development of self that are central in assisting one in understanding this most important process of human development:

1. The most fundamental difference between humans and other animals is their ability for self-awareness.

Only humans have reflective self-consciousness. They not only think, but they are aware that they are thinking; and they are aware of an "I" behind their thoughts and actions (Skolnick, 1986; p. 238).

2. The word self refers to the individual as seen from his or her point of view. Mischell (1977) defined the self as the person whose thoughts and behaviors are being studied.

3. Self-perception includes perceptions of our external world as well as an acknowledgement of our inner reality; the awareness of one's mental states and behaviors. There is a definite distinction between knowing about one's self and knowing about other people.

4. From the moment of birth, information about the self is available to the newborn.

5. Self-awareness does not just happen; it develops slowly and is a continuous process (Skolnick, 1986).

In tracing back the history of the development of identity, James (¹⁸⁹⁰~~1890~~), the founding father of modern psychology, was the

first to propose that there were two major aspects of the self, the "I" and the "me".

We may sum up by saying the personality implies the incessant presence of two elements, and objective person, known by a passing subjective thought and recognized as continuing in time. Hereafter, let us use the word "me" and "I" for the empirical person and the judging thought (James, 1890; p. 371).

James saw the "I" as the central part of the self and the first to develop, but the "me" as the aspect that was much easier to study. He referred to the "me" as the empirical self and believed it was based on actual, observable qualities such as self-concept, self-esteem. "The nucleus of the "me" is always the existence felt to be present at the time" (James, 1890; p. 400). Therefore, the "me" is always changing in order to deal with the reality of the moment while the "I" maintains a sense of continuity and sameness.

The empirical self or the "me" is divided into three parts:

(a) Material - this includes love of adornment, love of home, vanity, modesty, pride, wealth, (b) Social - this includes desire to please, to be noticed and admired, the ability to envy, to love, to honor, and the concept of ambition, (c) Spiritual - this contains intellectual, moral, and religious components as well as a sense of inferiority or guilt (James, 1890).

These aspects of the "me" develop as the child begins to think of him/herself in relation to others and begins to apply standards and

to evaluate him/herself in terms of those standards. As a result of these inner and outer evaluations, the child may feel pride or satisfaction or guilt and shame. Thus the child begins to develop general concepts of him/herself as good, bad, smart, dumb, helpless, or effective. According to James:

The central part of "me" is the feeling of the body and of the adjustments in the head; and in the feeling of the body should be included that of the general emotional tones and tendencies for at the bottom these are but the habits in which organic activities and sensibilities run (James, 1890; p. 371).

On the other hand, the sense of "I", although it develops first, involves a long process that gives one a relative identity of the "me" as it undergoes changes and experiences the passing of time. The "I" is the core of self-identity that remains the same and offers one a sense of continuity throughout one's life. "It is a thought, at each moment the latter, together with all that the latter called its own" (James, 1890; p. 401).

An element that the "I" and the "me" have in common is the possession of the same memories.

However different the man may be from the youth, both look back on the same childhood, and call it their own. Thus the identity found by the "I" in its "me" is only a loosely construed thing, and identity 'on the whole,' just like that which any outside observer might find in the same assemblage of facts (James, 1890; p. 372-373).

The basic component of the "I" is the sense of bodily self which gives one an increasing sense of personal existence. A child first learns of the bodily self or the "I" during the early stages of sensorimotor development. According to Piaget (1954), the period of sensorimotor development consists of six substages which reflect the child's use of senses to explore, to interact, and to understand his/her environment. Each stage expands upon the knowledge gained in the previous stage which follows an epigenetic concept of development. Erikson (1980) describes this epigenetic concept in the following way:

Anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole (Erikson, 1980; p. 53).

Thus we can also view the growth of self-identity and the fact that identity formation occurs gradually and in a systematic fashion.

A major milestone of the sensorimotor period and a concept crucial to the development of a permanent identity is the acquisition of object permanence. Object permanence refers to the child's ability to understand that persons or things exist even though they may be out of sight (Piaget, 1954; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). This concept is firmly developed during the fourth stage of Piaget's sensorimotor period, Coordination of Secondary Circular Reactions. At this time, the child is approximately eight to twelve months old. As the child incorporates

the concept that objects exist even when not in sight, he/she begins to realize that his/her own body also exists as a permanent object. This development of bodily self and body permanence is the foundation of our orientation to our personal reality and remains with us for life.

Further recognition of self-identity involves the concepts of physical and emotional self. Knowledge of the body as a physical object begins very early in life. Recent research suggests that by the second or third month, infants are able to make distinctions between self and others (Samuels, 1984; Stern, 1983; Watson, 1983). This early "I" is called "primary identity" and later is referred to as the "I". Primary identity is the recognition of one's self as a physical and mental being. The infant through his physical or bodily self has a basic sense of identity that says "I exist." "Knowledge of the body is the most basic knowledge about the self, and an intact body image or schema is essential to normal functioning" (Skolnick, 1986; p. 248). Therefore, our early knowledge of the world depends on our bodies and using all the senses of our body including sight, sound, smell, taste and especially touch. During the first two years of life, the child experiences his/her world by using his/her total body to interact with the environment (Piaget, 1954), and it is these early experiences with the bodily self that lay the foundation for further self-identity.

The emotional self is also thought to develop early in infancy and offers a further source of self-awareness for the young child. In fact, it is believed that emotional expressions are prewired in the brain and are biologically based in order to help one survive.

Research indicates that emotions are similar among all people the world over. Values may differ and what elicits emotions may differ, but the facial expressions for most emotions such as sad, happy, frown, anger, are the same no matter what the culture (Ekman, 1982; Izard, 1977). Also facial expressions for the different emotions remain the same across the life span; happiness is happiness, sadness is sadness consistently throughout one's life.

These very distinct emotions help one to develop early self-awareness and give continuity to individual identity. In fact, it is this continuity of emotions that provides an assurance that we can understand and be understood by others no matter where we may go.

In infancy emotions are simple and based around physical needs. Emotions are used to elicit responses from attending adults and to "draw attention to the physical and social boundaries of the self" (Campos, 1983; p. 816). It is only in adulthood that emotions concentrate more on maintaining one's self-concept. Emotions that are complex such as shame, jealousy, and guilt are learned emotions and relate to a complex image of one's self that develops after infancy. However, foundations of emotional identity are begun at birth and reflect the caretakers interactions and responses to the infant's basic needs.

Another area from which the self develops is that of social interactions (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Cooley's major idea was referred to as the "looking glass self" in which we gain knowledge of ourselves by the reactions of others to us. To the child, society acts as a mirror which helps to reveal us to ourselves. Without society and interactions, we would have no selves (Skolnick, 1986).

Mead's major concept was that of role-taking which gives one the ability to see oneself from the point of view of others. One way that we are able to take the role of others is through the use of shared symbols, such as language. This ability to role-take is crucial to the development of self-awareness in early childhood and is an important aspect to consider when planning curriculum for early childhood education programs. However, the ability to see ourselves from someone else's point of view develops slowly. Piaget (1954) believed the young child to be very egocentric, only able to see things from his/her own perspective. He believed that the child became less egocentric around the age of five or six years when he/she generally enters the concrete operational stage of cognitive development. Nevertheless, social interactions influence one's ability to develop self-awareness and to develop prosocial behaviors such as caring, sharing, helping that can have a positive effect on one's self-identity.

Other interest and research concerning identity formation relates to mirror responses in young children. Lacan (1936), a French psychoanalyst, postulated that between six and eighteen months a child goes

through a mirror-stage of development in which the child identifies with its reflection in the mirror. This mirror image of self is then thought to develop into a permanent part of the child's identity.

Dixon (1957) carried out the first systematic study of mirror recognition. Basically he observed children of different ages looking at themselves in a mirror. He derived four basic stages of mirror behavior:

Stage 1. Four to five months - The infant looks more at the mother's reflections than at his/her own.

Stage 2. Five to six months - The child plays with his/her own reflection as if it were that of someone else.

Stage 3. Six to twelve months - Attention was given to the contingency of the mirror image; every move one makes is also made by the image in the mirror.

Stage 4. Twelve to eighteen months - The child appeared self-conscious or fearful when viewing his/her own image in the mirror suggesting that self-recognition was beginning (Dixon, 1957).

Another study conducted in 1972 by Amsterdam also found stages similar to those of Dixon's. She placed rouge on the noses of the infants at different ages and then observed their reactions to see whether they touched their own noses when shown a mirror. It was concluded that self-recognition occurs around the ages of 21 to 24 months but never is evident before 15 months.

These studies confirm the notion that recognizing oneself in a mirror is a complex cognitive act that occurs when the child is able to manipulate symbols. It occurs after the child has established a primary sensorimotor identity, and before the child learns to use "I" and "you" correctly (Skolnick, 1986; p. 247). The mirror gives an image of what one already knows. It does not give one an identity if one does not already have an identity. Without an identity, the reflection in the mirror has no significance.

A more recent theory of self-identity was developed by Margaret Mahler (1975) and is referred to as the Theory of Object Relations. Mahler regards the development of self as the center of personality development and believes that self-identification follows a continuum from total dependency and lack of a sense of self to independence and the development of ego identity. The importance of the mother/infant attachment is stressed and particular attention is given to the concepts of separation, the awareness of being separate from the mother, and individuation, the acquiring of a distinct and unique personality.

She traces the process of self-identity from birth through the age of three. During the first few weeks of life, the infant is dominated mainly with concern for physical needs such as food and sleep. The theory refers to this as an autistic state in which there is little awareness of the outside world.

This is followed in the second month by a symbiotic period in which the child becomes dependent on the mother and believes that the mother and self are as one unit.

The mother could be said to act as the young infant's early ego when she accepts the baby's complete dependency and allows the child to relate his needs to satisfactions and comforts she provides (Musick & Householder, 1986; p. 318).

Mahler believes that this fusion is a prerequisite for later development of the sense of self. This dependency on the mother helps the infant to form a strong foundation or base for later development of independence and exploration. As a result, the mother's response to the infant is crucial to the development of a secure symbiotic stage or as Erikson (1980) would say, crucial to the development of the infant's trust in a safe and predictable world. However, at some point the child must separate from the mother and become autonomous. "The separate sense of self (ego identity) cannot be formed adequately if the child and mother fail to negotiate the issues of separation and individuation" (Musick & Householder, 1986; p. 318).

According to Mahler, the psychological birth of the child is divided into four phases which occur after the period of "normal symbiosis." These are stages in which the sense of self emerges gradually (from the age of four months to three years) and in which separation and individuation are critical factors. It is also through the repetition of appropriate care by the mother that the infant slowly develops some awareness that need-satisfaction comes from somewhere outside of the self.

Stage 1. Differentiation - four to nine months of age -
The infant begins to differentiate self from the mother. It is the period of the development of object permanence. Basic milestones at this time are learning to sit up and development of a visually directed reach. These abilities indicate the onset of the period of active exploration of the environment.

Stage 2. Practicing - ten months to fifteen months - This is referred to as a practicing period in which the child learns to separate willfully from the mother first by crawling and then by walking. "...learning to walk upright and free is a momentous experience in the child's life, the peak of body mastery and the beginning of a 'love affair with the world'" (Skolnick, 1986; p. 254). During this stage, the child becomes more self-sufficient learning many self-help skills such as feeding self, walking, talking etc. that help to make he/she more self-sufficient and less dependent on the mother.

Stage 3. Rapprochement - fifteen months to twenty-four months - This is referred to as the stage of rapprochement crisis in which the love affair with the world ends and a crisis period begins. The child realizes that he/she is a separate individual but is still dependent on others to satisfy his/her needs. It becomes a period of temper tantrums, mood swings, and a struggle of wills between the parent and child. The proverbial "no" is a common response of the child as the realization that he/she is a separate being from the parent begins to emerge. Conflict exists not only with the parents but also comes from within the child as issues of independence and autonomy are tested.

The child's personality is affected by the resolution of this crisis between dependence and independence.

Stage 4. Consolidation - age two to three years - The child achieves individuality through the development of a unique and distinctive personality.

Mahler believes that the quality of the mother/child interactions during the early years has a distinct effect on the child's later identity development. "The young infant's ego is to a great extent dependent upon the mother's ego and the mother's ability to meet this dependence" (Musick & Householder, 1986; p. 316). Failure during one of the four phases places the child at risk of certain types of psychopathology. For example, problems encountered during the symbiotic phase may influence the child's later inability to separate from the mother and to become independent. These early experiences of separation and individuation are critical in determining one's later personality. It is further believed "that all humans are caught in an eternal struggle between the wish for "oneness" with a loved person and the wish to be a free, autonomous individual" (Skolnick, 1986; p. 255).

Erikson also stresses the importance of the caretaker or mother during the first year of life ^{and} ~~has~~ the impact of early life experiences on the development of ego identity. Ego identity is a term coined by Erikson regarding how one views oneself (Erikson, 1950).

The first two years of life are believed to be the formative years which provide the foundation for future personality development.

According to Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development (1959), the life cycle is divided into eight epigenetic stages of development. During each stage a person must face and master a central problem which becomes dominant and which must be resolved if healthy development is to occur.

The foundation for all later development is found within the resolution of the first stage (birth to one year) which is called the stage of Basic Trust versus Mistrust. For the infant, a sense of trust requires that his/her basic needs are met. It also requires that a sense of love and security is developed from which the child can grow to perceive the world as consistent and predictable. If these needs are met, the child develops a feeling of trust. If the needs are not met and the child experiences a great deal of fear, inconsistency, and uncertainty, mistrust is developed.

This development of trust requires the love and attention of the mother or caretaker. She has the potential to affect the development of the infant's identity in either a positive or a negative direction.

The infant gains ego strength when the mother is able to empathize with infantile anxieties and frustrations and communicates this empathy by adapting herself to the baby's needs and demands. This adaptation paves the way for a successful resolution of the issue of basic trust versus mistrust (Erikson, 1968; p. 317).

This maternal support is also necessary for the infant to be able to

distinguish between the concept of "me" and "not me." When the mother responds favorably and the child begins to trust that his/her needs will be met, and that he/she is important, a sense of identity is being established.

Erikson and Mahler both agree that the mother/infant attachment and the development of trust are crucial factors in the development of a positive self-identity. The quality of interaction between the mother and child and the child and environment during these first two years of life lay the foundation for all future personality development.

In summary, the first two years of life are critical in the formation of a child's self-identity. According to James ¹⁸⁹⁰ (1900), the child first develops a sense of "I" or a sense of bodily self. This development of the "I" is the core of self-identity and offers one a sense of continuity throughout one's life.

Next is the development of the "me" (James, 1890) which continuously changes in order to meet the reality of the moment. This "me" is referred to as the empirical self and through its development, the child begins to see him/herself in relation to others.

According to Piaget (1968), a milestone of the first two years of life (sensorimotor period) is the acquisition of object permanence. As the child ^{incorporates} ~~incor~~ the concept that objects exist even when not in sight, he/she begins to realize that his/her body is also a permanent object.

Further recognition of self-identity involves the concept of physical and emotional self. Knowledge of the body is the most basic knowledge one has about the self.

Emotional awareness is thought to be biologically based since emotions are similar among people all over the world. Foundations of emotional identity are begun at birth and are influenced by the child's interactions with the mother or the major caretaker.

Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) believed that these early social interactions of the infant affected the development of self. Cooley (1902) developed the concept of "the looking glass self" while Mead (1934) stressed the importance of role-taking in the formation of self-identity.

Research by Lacan (1936), Dixon (1957), and Amsterdam (1972) all related to mirror responses in young children. The recognition of the mirror image of self occurs around the age of eighteen to twenty-four months and is thought to become a permanent part of the child's identity.

Margaret Mahler (1975) and Erik Erikson (1959) both stressed the importance of the mother/infant interactions during early infancy. Mahler gave particular attention to the concepts of separation and individuation and the push/pull nature of the mother/child relationship during the second year of life.

Erikson (1950) stressed the importance of the mother in helping the child during the first year to develop a firm sense of trust which

is a critical factor in the formation of a positive personality and self-identity.

It is evident through the comparison of this information that self-identity is a process that begins at birth and is greatly influenced by parents and the child's interactions with his/her environment. Through physical and emotional responses, the infant learns to influence the environment and to gain recognition of his/herself as being separate from the mother. It is this development of separateness and the act of becoming a unique independent individual that enhances one's self-identity and affects all future personality development as one proceeds through the life cycle.

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